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Trapped in routine? Here's how to “dishabituate” and rediscover joy

Neuroscientist Tali Sharot recently spoke with Big Think about a two-step method for escaping the dark sides of habits.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

We often talk about the power and importance of habits, but we often neglect to consider the darker sides of habits. Neuroscientist Tali Sharot spoke with Big Think about two ways to "dishabituate" yourself: take a break or make a change. Sharot said that our lives will have exploring and exploiting stages, and it's important to keep track of the balance.

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The alarm goes off to herald the start of another glorious routine! It's time to do the same things in the same order and in the same way: eat the same breakfast, take the same commute, see the same people, and, at the end of the day, go to bed at the same time. Slowly but surely, your entire life becomes banal routine, and the world outside of this gray monotony fades to nothing. You close yourself off to the world.

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This is what French existentialist Gabriel Marcel called “crispation,” and he saw a lot of it in society. For Marcel, crispation is when everything gets stuck or entombed in a dense mesh of habits and routines. It's the state of mind that says, “But... I've always done it *this way*” when presented with a new opportunity. Crispation is what says no to the wandering wizard's call to adventure, choosing to stay home and watch TV instead. We get burrowed under a “kind of shell” that gradually hardens and imprisons us.

In some ways, we live in an age of habit-fetishization. James Clear's *Atomic Habits* has sold more than 15 million copies worldwide, and media outlets regularly publish articles and videos with titles like "**How to Build Successful Habits.**" But, as Marcel knew, there's a shadow side to habits. Shift your perspective and habits look like ruts. Routine becomes crispation.

Perhaps it's time to embrace "dishabituation." We should break out of the box and take on something new. To explore what dishabituation means and how it's an essential part of flourishing, Big Think spoke with bestselling author and neuroscientist Tali Sharot about her most recent book, *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There*.

A habit taken for granted

Habits are formed when you do an action so often that it becomes effortless. The power of habituation is that it makes automatic things that once required conscious, determined effort. As Sharot put it, "Habituation means that we respond less and less and less to things that are constant or frequent and are always there." Habits allow you to do things easily. They let you focus on other things.

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The problem is that a lot of things we call “habits” *deserve* our focus. Sharot talks about things like racism and sexism, where it’s easy to normalize or get used to both. But it could also be “inefficiencies of the workplace or cracks in the relationships.” Someone might be in a toxic relationship for so long that it becomes the norm. Their habit means they fail to see the things that should be seen: the inadequacy of their partner.

But this habitual oversight also works the other way. There are wonderful and cherished things in life, and when we take these things for granted, it lessens them a bit. When you see a friend every week or a spouse every day, they can start to fall into the background. Bit by bit, we start to see others not as people but as props on a set. Even our closest relatives, such as children or loved ones, can become folded into our routines.

So, habits have one major pitfall: They let us ignore what *needs* to be seen.

Breaking and changing

Sometimes, then, we need to break a habit by consciously adopting a plan of “dishabituation.” We have to learn again to see what we used to see. Sharot argues that there are two main ways to do this: breaking and changing.

First, you take a *break* from the habit.

“Breaking is the idea that we take a break from something,” Sharot said, “and then come back to it, right? And then once we come back to it, we’re able to see it again...[For example], people might leave their daily lives, maybe just on a business trip for a couple of weeks, and then they come back home. Suddenly they see their home life afresh, whether it is their home, the view from the window, or their families, right? Suddenly you feel this kind of gratitude again because you’ve been away and you come back.”

Sharot noted that the psychological benefits of breaking things up are seen in everything from how we enjoy music (even listening to a song in parts enhances the experience) to massages. It’s why we tend to enjoy watching TV shows more, overall, by tuning in each week rather than in an eight-hour streaming binge.

Second, you *change* the habit. Changing can involve breaking, but usually involves a more lasting change. For example, you might change your environment. Let’s say you’re always working on the same task at the same time of day. You might choose to go to a café for that task or to work outside. Changing habits in this way is especially useful for creativity. This isn’t just about artists and musicians mixing it up. It’s about creativity in your everyday life.



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As Sharot put it, “If you’ve been with the same or a bunch of people or have been in the same place for a while, with the same policies and the same routines, it will be more difficult for them to see what are the things that we can do better, right? Because of habituation.”

So consider bringing some creative change to your habits — even if it’s something as simple as where you work or whom you work with.

Explorers and exploiters

Of course, there’s a reason why books like *Atomic Habits* sell millions of copies and why we’re all so curious about habit-forming strategies. Habits are useful. Our brains *need* certain habitual heuristics to function at all — and often the most successful people are those who form strong habits. So, the question is one of balance.

“We talk a little bit about explorers versus exploiters,” Sharot said. “So people who are explorers like to try a lot of new things. So, they might go visit different places, and they might talk to different types of people, right? Exploiters tend to just do more of the same thing that they find that they like a lot. Eat the same kind of thing and so on....and the optimal solution is somewhere in the middle you want to exploit; you want to take the good stuff they already know.”

The overall thesis of Sharot’s new book is that too many of us are living the lives of exploiters. We’re staying put and sticking with old favorites. This is especially true in middle age.

“People in midlife have the lowest subjective happiness ratings for all age groups,” Sharot said. “It’s quite high in teenagers and kids, and then it goes down, down, down, reaching your rock bottom in midlife. [This is because] mostly and on average, people establish a family, right? Because of that, you mostly live in one place. In terms of your

profession, you've kind of reached the peak or are close to it, and you are kind of just maintaining rather than developing or moving."

The midlife crisis and the dissatisfied ennui of stagnation are fueled by an excess of exploitation. We're often made unhappy by our habits. So consider finding ways to change and break some of yours. By challenging the comfort of our daily patterns, we open ourselves to new experiences, perspectives, and connections. It seems foolish to wait for a crisis to jolt us out of complacency; instead, we should seek opportunities to explore. We should aim to grow and not stagnate. Embracing change is not just an escape from monotony, but a step toward living a life full of purpose and joy.

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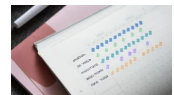
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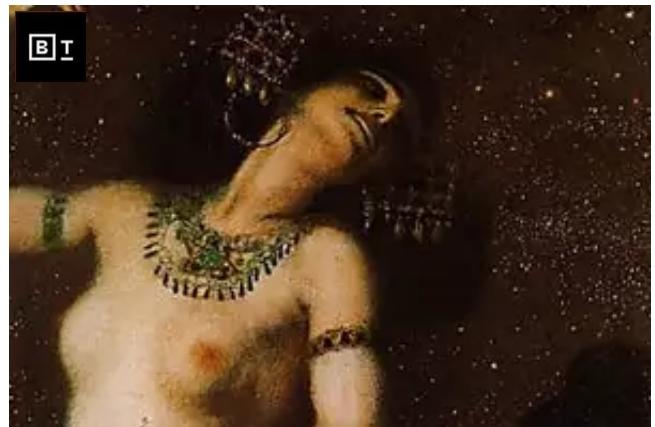
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